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NEWSLETTER

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Biotechnology is Sliding Under the Public Microscope

The agri-food industry in North America is adjusting to public interest in biotechnology. As a lead up to our November 12th seminar entitled, "Marketing Implications of Biotechnology", here is a collection of ideas from various sources about public perception.

Why Embrace Biotech?

Proponents cite biotechnology as the science that is helping the agriculture industry reduce pesticide use. This is the science that is increasing yields in North America and may help grow crops in countries previously thought barren. Biotechnology might soon add qualities to our food that improve our health and protect the most vulnerable from life threatening diseases.

According to literature put out by the Consumers' Association of Canada and the Food Biotechnology Communications Network, "scientists are, for example, working to increase the amount of lysine protein in rice. This would reduce childhood blindness caused by lysine deficiency, a serious problem in countries such as China." Other diseases such as Crohn's and diabetes might be fought by altered proteins according to recently presented findings of the London Health Sciences Centre and the Robarts Research Institute.

With all this seemingly so possible, why is there concern and for some people, fear, about biotechnology?

Understanding Fears

In her book, *CLICKING*, futurist and business consultant, Faith Popcorn, coined the term, "Atmosfear" to

describe a trend she sees developing. It boils down to fear motivated decisions.

According to Ms. Popcorn, what is developing is a collective fear. "It goes beyond a general sense of uneasiness. It's deeper. (There is) a new national nervousness that comes from continual assaults on our health and well being," she says. Her point is that we are served up a powerful brew of things to fear from plane crashes to flesh eating disease; AIDS to E. coli; from the danger air bags pose to our children to the fear that cell phones may be linked to brain cancers. All of this anxiety is building up.

As recent evidence of her point, this article is being written in late October when two new cases of Mad Cow Disease have just been reported in France. "That brings the total cases of BSE in France this year to twenty-one" according to the Reuters News Service. At the same time an E.coli outbreak was still underway in London, Ontario with 6 confirmed cases and 82 others suspected. The public is notified that "the disease takes three to eight days to develop symptoms and it could have been transmitted a limitless number of times by now" according to the Canadian Press. Just two examples of the ample supply of anxiety-creating health news consumed everyday in every home in the nation.

Biotech in this Climate

The news on biotechnology is confusing for a consumer. They are receiving contradictory information from scientists and doctors. For example, Dr. Paul Billings, a medical geneticist with the Heart of Texas Health Care System is quoted as saying that although researchers have been genetically altering crops for generations, the purpose has changed in the past five years, creating new, unknown health risks. On the opposite side of the issue, Henry Miller, a fellow at Stanford University and a former official of the U. S. Food and Drug administration, says that the products of (biotechnology) are more predictable and safer than the way foods like seedless grapes were bred before.

"While we are a generally well educated population, we are quite ignorant in the area of food chemistry" says Dr. Elizabeth Whelan, past president of the American Council on Science and Health speaking to the Ontario Institute of Agrologists. She feels, "Americans have become a nation characterized by believing that there is a carcinogen on every plate and a toxin under every pillow." That makes separating the real issues from the non-issues confusing for every consumer.

As evidence of Dr. Whelan's comments, the June 1999 issue of The Economist stated that almost half of North Americans surveyed, "thought their groceries were free of biotechnology, when in reality almost 60% of processed food is affected... it is precisely this ignorance that has muted public discussion of GMO crops in North America, at least until now."

Atmosfear Forecasts

If Atmosfear does impact on the public's perception of biotechnology, what responses might start showing up?

Ms. Popcorn suggests, "walk into any supermarket or drug store and you'll find dozens of products that promise to boost our immune systems and destroy free-radicals. These products weren't developed out of thin air --- but out of Atmosfear." If biotechnology can cater to this consumer interest, it will probably be a hit.

Since 1998, Ms. Popcorn has been telling clients that "clean, source-protected foods may be the next

wave. (While this is not motivated by biotechnology concerns alone she predicts that) the entire growing and manufacturing chain (may be pushed to) scrutinize and document for purity. The cost of these upgrades to the food system: high."

Experts estimated in The Economist that a system to segregate soybeans in the United States could roughly double the final cost of non-GMO varieties. "For food manufacturers, such as Unilever, this would mean a 25% premium on the final cost of goods" according to Professor Allan Buckwell of Wye College in Britain who recently completed the industry-sponsored study reported in The Economist.

Meanwhile some firms are trying to build business based on the idea of identity-preservation for the unmodified part of the crop. One grain handler who has already taken the plunge in America is Protein Technologies International, a DuPont company. They have set up a distinct processing system, from farm to final product, in order to sell GMO free lecithin to their food processing customers. However, they find they can only claim the lecithin is 99.5% GMO-free since some contamination is apparently unavoidable which is still a problem for the processors and retailers who may want to make promises of offering completely GMO free products. Closer to home, Casco and W.G. Thompson have both announced that their elevators will not accept any corn hybrids not already approved in Europe.

Although the details have to be worked out, a voluntary labeling system for GMOs is being co-ordinated by the Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency will enforce the standards to prevent false or misleading label claims.

Quoted in Ontario Farmer, Christian Farmers' Federation GM, John Clement, thinks there is another lesson here for biotechnology. It could be a case of the benefits of biotechnology being mostly producer-focused up to now instead of consumer-focused. The resulting communications are flawed because "most people see GMOs carrying many more risks than personal benefits."

Looking at the experience in Britain and most of the European Union, The Economist says, "The bottom line, at present, is the Brit's perception of risk far outweighs its view of the possible benefits. Objections to GMO foods are based mainly on the suspicion that the stuff will, in the long term, prove unhealthy." Almost these same words were used by Dr. David Suzuki on October 18/99 when his concern appeared in most major newspapers in Canada as the debate heats up here.

Coming Soon

Under the "Coming Soon" heading, the Food Biotechnology Communications Network quotes the following observation from Jeremy Rifkin, author of The Biotech Century : "In the field of genetics, the quantity of information is doubling every two years. The commercial possibilities, say the scientists, are limited only by the span of the human imagination and the whims and caprices of the marketplace."

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OFPMC November Update:

Editor's Note:

Our regular OFPMC Update will be back in the next issue. The Commission's monthly meeting was delayed in October to correspond with its industry tour. The chicken allocation hearing was held at the

end of September, and the decision is expected in the near future.

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